

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A12NEW YORK TIMES
30 May 1986

Intelligence Chiefs Ask Journalists' Cooperation

WASHINGTON, May 29 (AP) — The Director of Central Intelligence and the head of the National Security Agency asked journalists today to cooperate in efforts to reduce disclosures of sensitive information they said had cost lives and billions of taxpayer dollars.

In a joint interview, William J. Casey, the C.I.A. chief, and Lieut. Gen. William E. Odom, director of the security agency, played down their recent threats of criminal prosecution made against news organizations and backed off from a warning they issued Wednesday to reporters covering the espionage trial of Ronald W. Pelton, a former communications expert at the security agency. They warned the journalists not to cover material not raised at the trial.

General Odom, Mr. Casey and his deputy, Robert M. Gates, agreed to the interview "to lower the noise level, turn down the volume and have a serious dialogue," Mr. Gates said.

Casey Calls Press 'Hysterical'

Mr. Casey said intelligence officials had not "made ourselves always as clear as we might be." "And I think that certainly the press has been very hysterical about the thing, saying we're trying to tear up the First Amendment and scuttle the freedom of the press," he said. "We're not trying to do that."

But Mr. Casey and Mr. Gates said agents had disappeared after disclosures in this country. They declined to provide details.

The intelligence officials appealed to reporters working on stories which involve intelligence-gathering techniques to call the intelligence agency for guidance.

"We're saying that you can write about the whole range of national security issues without revealing unique, fragile national intelligence sources," Mr. Gates said.

Mr. Casey added, "We will work with you on that line."

The interview came as Reagan Administration sources, insisting on anonymity, described the Justice Department as extremely reluctant to comply with Mr. Casey's recent request that NBC News be prosecuted for reporting that Mr. Pelton had told the Soviet Union about eavesdropping involving American submarines.

General Odom argued that news organizations could be prosecuted under a 1950 statute for publishing material about United States communications intelligence. The Justice Department has never used the law against a news

organization. Sources in the department said they believed it would be very difficult to win a conviction of a journalist under the law.

General Odom said he would recommend prosecution of journalists with "the greatest reluctance."

Wednesday, Mr. Casey and General Odom had cautioned reporters at the Pelton trial in Baltimore "against speculation and reporting details beyond the information actually released at trial." Legal experts in and out of Government quickly pointed out that the Government had no power to regulate "speculation" by news organizations.

But a spokesman for the White House said earlier today that the Administration was "in full agreement with the thrust of the statement" Mr. Casey and General Odom made Wednesday. The spokesman said the statement called for journalists to consider "very, very carefully" reporting details "beyond the information that has actually been released at the trial."

General Odom said he and Mr. Casey were concerned about disclosure of sensitive information because a series of leaks about communications systems "over the last six months is the most serious we can remember in a long, long time."

Mr. Casey added, "Every method we have of obtaining intelligence: our agents, our relationships with other intelligence services, our photographic, our electronic, our communications capabilities have been damaged. Everyone of them has been severely damaged by disclosures of sensitive information."

"This is costing the taxpayers billions and billions of dollars and, more importantly, Americans' and our national security are at risk," he said.

Information Already Public

They were asked why in the Pelton trial the Government is attempting to protect information that is widely known to United States reporters and widely believed to be known to the Soviet Union.

Mr. Gates replied that reporters could not know "the degree to which the information they provide amplifies on what a spy may have given, confirms what a spy may have given or updates what a spy has given up."

General Odom added that the Government was faced with the danger that seemingly innocuous pieces of information would be surrendered "fact by fact until you cross through the line without every knowing it, and the accumulation of facts adds up to a new body of information."

The officials were reluctant to provide information about damage from leaks. Mr. Casey did say, however, that after news organizations reported about United States eavesdropping on a communication line in Beirut "that traffic stopped, undermining our ability to deter future attacks, which did occur."

The officials said they also were attempting to curb leakers inside the Government.

Mr. Casey attributed the increased leaks on "a breakdown in discipline in the Government primarily." He said this coincided with a rise in "the tempo of threats in this terrorist rampage."